



China-Serbia Partnership Discourse in Serbia's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

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Abstract— Serbia has deepened its relations with China while formally maintaining European Union membership as its principal foreign-policy objective. This article examines how that apparently contradictory position is constructed and used. Drawing on Chinese and Serbian policy documents, European Commission reports, trade statistics, and the cases of railway construction, industrial investment, and the China-Serbia Free Trade Agreement, it connects partnership discourse with Serbia's role claims and foreign-policy practice. It argues that expressions such as “ironclad friendship,” “comprehensive strategic partnership,” and “community with a shared future” do more than celebrate bilateral goodwill. They provide continuity and political legitimacy for cooperation and help Serbian leaders present the country as a development-oriented, autonomous, and regionally connected actor. Yet this agency remains bounded. The European Union continues to be Serbia's principal market, investor, regulatory reference, and accession framework. China-Serbia cooperation therefore does not replace a European regional order. It gives Belgrade additional partners and bargaining resources within that order, while creating new trade, regulatory, environmental, and political tensions. The case demonstrates that changes in the Western Balkans cannot be understood solely as competition among external powers; they also depend on how local governments interpret and deploy external relationships.



Keywords— China-Serbia relations, Western Balkans, partnership discourse, multi-vector foreign policy, regional role

I. INTRODUCTION

For much of the post-Cold War period, the Western Balkans were interpreted through the vocabulary of European integration. The European Union's 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration affirmed that the future of the region lay within the EU, and accession conditionality subsequently linked market access, financial assistance, and the prospect of membership to reforms in the rule of law, public administration, competition policy, environmental governance, and foreign-policy alignment (Council of the European Union, 2003). This framework established Europe as the dominant institutional horizon for regional transformation. It did not, however, produce a linear or uniform process of Europeanisation.

More than two decades later, enlargement fatigue among member states, slow domestic reform, the unresolved status of Kosovo, and new security divisions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine have made the timing and political rewards of accession increasingly uncertain. Western Balkan governments have not left the European institutional space, but they have cultivated relations with China, Russia, Türkiye, and Gulf states in order to diversify finance, diplomatic support, and development opportunities. Serbia is the clearest case of this pattern. It obtained EU candidate status in 2012 and opened accession negotiations in 2014, yet it also maintains unusually institutionalised relations with China.

The bilateral relationship has developed rapidly. China and Serbia established a strategic partnership in

2009 and upgraded it to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016. They signed a free trade agreement in 2023, which entered into force on 1 July 2024, and in May 2024 announced the construction of a China-Serbia “community with a shared future in the new era” (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2024a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). Infrastructure projects, including the Belgrade-Budapest railway and the Zemun-Borca bridge, have been accompanied by major industrial investments, notably HBIS's acquisition of the Smederevo steel plant and Zijin Mining's operations in Bor. Cooperation has consequently evolved from a collection of projects into a relationship that connects political narratives, finance, production, transport, and trade rules.

How, then, should Serbia's simultaneous pursuit of European integration and close relations with China be understood? An alignment-centred approach tends to describe this behaviour as vacillation between geopolitical camps. A purely bilateral account, by contrast, may reduce the relationship to mutually beneficial projects and overlook why EU institutions increasingly treat some agreements with China as matters of strategic and regulatory concern. Both approaches risk presenting Serbia as a passive arena in which external powers compete.

This article shifts the analysis from great-power “entry” to local use. It asks three connected questions. First, how do Chinese and Serbian officials construct their partnership through recurrent labels, historical memories, and policy language? Second, how does Serbia connect this language to cooperation in infrastructure, industry, and trade in order to claim the roles of development partner, autonomous actor, and regional connector? Third, how do these role claims affect Serbia's relations with the EU and the wider Western Balkan order?

The central argument is that Serbia's multi-vector diplomacy is not an attempt to maintain equal distance between China and the EU. It is a strategy of widening partnership options while preserving the European path. Partnership discourse helps make this strategy intelligible and politically legitimate: it casts cooperation with China as evidence of sovereign choice, reliable friendship, and national development rather than as a departure from Europe. Material projects give that discourse visible content and provide the Serbian government with resources that can be converted into domestic legitimacy and diplomatic leverage. Nevertheless, this agency is constrained by the asymmetry of economic relations with China and by Serbia's much deeper dependence on the European market, accession institutions, and regulatory system.

The article uses a qualitative single-case design. Its primary material consists of joint statements and official documents issued by the Chinese and Serbian sides, EU country reports, and Serbian trade statistics. These are read together with scholarly work on Europeanisation, external influence, symbolic power, strategic hedging, and role theory. Three policy fields—infrastructure, industrial investment, and free trade—are used as embedded cases. The aim is not to measure the causal effect of individual words. It is to identify how recurring political descriptions organise expectations, legitimate projects, and support role claims, and then to test the limits of those claims against trade and regulatory evidence. The article's contribution is therefore twofold: it treats Serbia as an interpreter and user of external relationships rather than merely a target of influence, and it shows how partnership discourse acquires political force when it is attached to projects that can be used to substantiate national role claims.

II. EUROPEANISATION, EXTERNAL ACTORS, AND LOCAL AGENCY

A. European Integration as a Structuring Framework

Europeanisation remains the starting point for understanding Serbia's external relations. The accession process reaches into domestic law, administrative practice, competition rules, public procurement, environmental policy, and foreign-policy alignment. It is therefore more than one partnership among many. The European Commission's 2024 report noted that 22 of Serbia's 35 negotiating chapters had been opened and only two provisionally closed, while further progress continued to depend on rule-of-law reform and the normalisation of relations with Kosovo (European Commission, 2024, pp. 3-4). This slow progress illustrates both the depth of EU involvement and the reduced credibility of a rapid membership reward.

Conditionality is not transmitted mechanically. Compliance has immediate domestic costs, while membership remains distant and politically uncertain. Candidate governments can therefore seek alternative finance and diplomatic support in order to renegotiate the pace and terms of reform. Serbia does not reject Europeanisation as a whole. Rather, it separates the long-term destination of EU membership from the short-term choice of partners and projects. That separation creates political space for multi-vector diplomacy.

Studies of the Western Balkans have increasingly examined how the EU's dominant position interacts with the involvement of China and other external actors. One strand emphasises the danger that interstate agreements,

opaque contracts, environmental disputes, and weak labour protection may reinforce illiberal governance and undermine EU standards. Research on Chinese economic influence in Serbia, for example, connects industrial investment with pollution and political practices that limit accountability (Němec & Stojarová, 2025). Soyaltin-Colella (2023) similarly links Chinese finance to corruption risks within the accession context.

Another strand cautions against treating China as a substitute regional hegemon or Serbian officials as passive recipients. Pavličević (2019) argues that the triangular relationship among China, the EU, and the Western Balkans remains shaped by the EU's structural power: access to the European market, regulatory influence, and enlargement policy delimit the space in which Chinese engagement operates. Projects financed or constructed by Chinese actors may supply options that European institutions did not provide under the same terms, but their long-term operation is still affected by European rules and markets.

This debate frequently becomes polarised. Critical accounts sometimes move too quickly from project controversies to the conclusion that China causes democratic decline, under-specifying the choices of Serbian institutions and political elites. Celebratory accounts, on the other hand, treat “win-win cooperation” as an explanation rather than an official claim and pay insufficient attention to the distribution of benefits, costs, and decision-making power. A local-agency approach can avoid both errors by asking what Serbian officials do with the relationship and what limits their choices.

B. Partnership Discourse and Role Construction

Partnership labels are often dismissed as ceremonial language, yet diplomatic language has practical functions. It ranks relationships, establishes continuity, signals expectations to bureaucracies and firms, and offers public justifications for policy. Vangeli's (2018) analysis of the China-Central and Eastern Europe cooperation framework demonstrates that symbolic power is an important component of China's regional engagement. Repeated descriptions of friendship, equality, respect, and mutual benefit create a vocabulary through which cooperation is recognised and reproduced.

These descriptions are not imposed unchanged on local actors. Serbian political leaders select and reinterpret them within domestic narratives of sovereignty, historical loyalty, development, and territorial integrity. The meaning of the relationship is consequently co-produced, though not necessarily symmetrically. Chinese discourse situates Serbia within broader concepts of Belt and Road cooperation and a community with a shared future. Serbian

discourse gives particular prominence to “ironclad friendship,” reliable support over Kosovo, the memory of the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and projects represented as rescuing employment or overcoming infrastructure neglect.

Role theory helps connect this language to foreign-policy conduct. National roles are claims about what a state is and what it should do in relation to others; they are shaped by domestic self-understandings and by recognition or resistance from external audiences (Harnisch et al., 2011). In the Serbian case, three role claims recur across official narratives and material practices. Serbia is presented as a development-oriented partner capable of attracting investment and modernising infrastructure; as an autonomous actor entitled to cooperate with all willing partners; and as a regional connector whose transport position and political relations link the Balkans with Central Europe and wider Eurasian networks.

These roles overlap but are not identical. A new railway can be narrated simultaneously as a development achievement and as evidence that Serbia is becoming a regional hub. A free trade agreement can be represented as economic opportunity and as proof of sovereign diplomatic choice. The analytical value of role language lies in showing how particular projects become elements of a broader account of national position. It does not imply that rhetoric automatically produces the claimed outcome. Each role must be compared with material patterns, institutional constraints, and the responses of other actors.

C. Materials and Analytical Procedure

The textual corpus covers the period from the establishment of the strategic partnership in 2009 through December 2024. Documents were included when they met at least one of three criteria: they formally defined the bilateral relationship; they connected partnership language to a major policy field; or they stated Serbia's position toward China, the EU, sovereignty, development, or regional connectivity. The core corpus comprises the 2024 joint presidential statement published by Serbia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Serbian ministry's bilateral-relations profile and 2021 ministerial statement on “steel friendship,” the corresponding Chinese joint statement and FTA notices, the European Commission's 2024 Serbia Report, and Serbia's official external-trade release (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, 2024a, 2024b).

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the documents were read for recurrent relationship labels and justificatory terms, including friendship, sovereignty, territorial integrity, development, mutual benefit,

autonomy, and connectivity. Second, the statements surrounding those terms were grouped under three inductively derived role claims: development partner, autonomous actor, and regional connector. Third, these claims were compared with project and trade evidence and with EU assessments. This last step functions as a credibility check: a role claim is treated as politically consequential when it recurs across documents and is attached to a policy practice, but not as proof that the claimed material outcome has been achieved. The procedure is informed by work showing that external strategic narratives matter when local actors can appropriate them without undermining their own identity and interests (van Noort & Colley, 2021).

This design has limits. The corpus consists of public, English-language documents and therefore captures official representation rather than confidential decision-making. It does not establish how individual audiences received every narrative, nor does it attribute project outcomes to discourse alone. Its purpose is narrower: to reconstruct the relationship between official language, visible cooperation, and Serbia's role claims, while using independent regulatory and economic evidence to identify the limits of those claims.

III. FROM STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP TO A COMMUNITY WITH A SHARED FUTURE

A. The Escalation of Partnership Labels

The formal evolution of China-Serbia relations has been accompanied by an escalation of diplomatic labels. The 2009 strategic partnership provided a durable political framework. Its upgrade to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016 widened the declared scope of cooperation and distinguished Serbia within China's European diplomacy. In May 2024, the two governments announced that Serbia would become the first European country to build with China a “community with a shared future in the new era” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

The accumulation of labels matters less as a legal hierarchy than as a claim of continuity. Each new formulation incorporates the earlier history of the relationship and presents deeper cooperation as the natural next stage. Official texts repeatedly refer to “ironclad friendship,” mutual respect, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and support on questions of core interest. This vocabulary reduces the appearance that individual projects are opportunistic transactions. It represents them instead as expressions of a stable political relationship.

The two sides nevertheless emphasise different elements. Chinese accounts connect Serbia to the Belt and Road Initiative, China-CEE cooperation, and broader ideas about international partnership. Serbian leaders more often translate the relationship into narratives of recognition and choice: China is a partner that does not impose political conditions, supports Serbia's position on Kosovo, and invests in projects portrayed as having been neglected by others. Serbia's own foreign ministry describes China as its most important Asian trade partner and identifies the bridge, railway, steel, mining, and energy projects as central components of the relationship (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, 2024a). Its 2021 account of “steel friendship” explicitly connects bilateral ties to mutual support on questions of sovereignty and territorial integrity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). Vladisavljev (2021) shows how the Serbian political elite's representation of “steel friendship” contributed to a favourable image of China. Partnership language is therefore not simply copied from Beijing. It is incorporated into a Serbian narrative of national dignity and dependable friendship.

The 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy occupies a distinctive place in this narrative. Commemoration creates a shared memory of vulnerability and reinforces claims of political solidarity. Yet historical memory alone cannot explain the speed or breadth of cooperation. Its significance lies in supplying moral depth to a relationship whose contemporary expansion is driven largely by development finance, industrial investment, market access, and diplomatic calculation.

B. Infrastructure as a Material Carrier of Friendship

Infrastructure makes diplomatic language visible. Bridges, railways, and industrial facilities can be visited by leaders, displayed in media coverage, and linked to employment and mobility. The Zemun-Borca bridge and the Belgrade-Budapest railway are especially important because they connect the partnership to Serbia's aspiration to become a transport hub.

The railway has both domestic and transnational meanings. Domestically, it is presented as evidence of modernisation and the government's ability to deliver major projects. Regionally, it is linked to a corridor from the port of Piraeus through the Balkans toward Central European markets (Railway Technology, n.d.). The 2024 joint presidential statement likewise defines the Serbia-Hungary railway as important to Serbia's connections with the region and to the movement of people and goods (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, 2024b). This spatial narrative supports the role of Serbia as

a connector rather than a peripheral recipient of external capital.

Infrastructure cooperation also reveals tensions obscured by celebratory language. Interstate financing and contracting can accelerate implementation, but exemptions from ordinary procurement procedures raise questions about transparency and compatibility with EU norms. Project delays, cost revisions, and cross-border regulatory differences demonstrate that political endorsement does not remove technical or institutional constraints. The same project can therefore increase connectivity while becoming a site of contestation over governance.

The political importance of infrastructure should not be inferred solely from its physical completion. Large projects produce expectations, bureaucratic networks, and sunk political costs long before all sections become operational. They also enable leaders to narrate time differently: present disruption is justified by a promised future in which Serbia occupies a central place in regional transport. Partnership discourse helps sustain that future-oriented claim.

C. Industrial and Institutional Expansion

The acquisition of the Smederevo steel plant by HBIS and Zijin Mining's investment in Bor moved cooperation beyond construction contracts. These investments connected Chinese firms to local production, exports, employment, municipal revenue, and environmental politics. The Smederevo case has been represented in Serbian official discourse as the rescue of an industrial community and a demonstration that political friendship can yield concrete social benefits. Bor similarly illustrates how foreign investment can expand output and exports while intensifying disputes over pollution, labour, and local accountability.

Industrial investment complicates the interpretation of bilateral trade. Goods produced in Serbia by Chinese-owned companies appear statistically as Serbian exports, even when ownership, technology, and decision-making remain transnational. Export growth therefore cannot be equated automatically with the development of domestically controlled productive

capacity. At the same time, dismissing such production as wholly external would ignore employment, tax revenue, supplier relations, and infrastructure improvements. The relevant question is how gains, risks, and control are distributed.

The China-Serbia Free Trade Agreement represents a further institutional step. Signed in 2023 and effective from 1 July 2024, it moves the relationship from project-based cooperation toward a rules-based framework for market access (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2024a, 2024b). Official Chinese accounts emphasise tariff reduction, new opportunities for firms, and the further development of bilateral trade. Serbian accounts similarly present access to the Chinese market as an opportunity for agriculture, wine, food processing, and industrial production.

The agreement also creates a direct connection between bilateral cooperation and Serbia's European future. EU accession ultimately requires alignment with the EU's common commercial policy. Serbia would therefore have to withdraw from or revise bilateral trade arrangements incompatible with membership. The European Commission described the agreement as a matter of strategic concern and reiterated the need for Serbia to align progressively with EU trade policy (European Commission, 2024, p. 95). The FTA expands Serbia's current room for manoeuvre, but it does not establish a permanent alternative commercial order.

IV. COOPERATION AND SERBIA'S REGIONAL ROLES

A. Development Partner: Trade Growth and Its Limits

Bilateral trade has grown quickly and is central to the official narrative of successful cooperation. Serbian statistics for January-November 2024 show that exports to China increased considerably compared with the same period in 2023, while imports also rose. China consequently accounted for a larger share of both Serbian exports and imports (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). Table 1 summarises the official preliminary data available at the time of the original release.

Table 1. Serbia's Trade with China, January-November 2023 and January-November 2024

Indicator	Jan.-Nov. 2023	Jan.-Nov. 2024	Change
Serbian exports to China (EUR billion)	1.0700	1.6292	+52.3%
Serbian imports from China (EUR billion)	4.1384	4.6877	+13.3%
China's share of Serbian exports	4.0%	6.1%	+2.1 percentage points
China's share of Serbian imports	12.3%	13.2%	+0.9 percentage points

Source: Compiled from Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2024). Figures for 2024 were preliminary when released.

The increase in exports supports the government's claim that relations with China offer more than one-way financing. Yet three qualifications are necessary. First, the bilateral balance remains substantially in China's favour. Second, a large part of Serbia's exports is concentrated in metals and products connected to Chinese-owned industrial facilities. Third, Serbia's overall economic orientation remains European. The EU continues to dominate Serbia's trade and investment environment and to shape standards faced by Serbian producers (European Commission, 2024, pp. 95-98).

The "development partner" role is therefore credible but selective. Cooperation has brought infrastructure, industrial production, and access to capital, and it has created visible gains that the Serbian government can communicate domestically. It has not eliminated asymmetry or transformed China into Serbia's principal economic framework. Official narratives emphasise gross growth and flagship successes; analysis must also examine composition, ownership, regulatory costs, and opportunity costs.

Environmental controversy further limits the development narrative. Research on Chinese-owned heavy industry in Serbia documents the interaction between pollution concerns and political practices that restrict effective accountability (Němec & Stojarová, 2025). These problems should not be attributed to foreign ownership alone. Serbian regulatory institutions, local political incentives, and the legacy of heavy industry are central mediating factors. Nevertheless, they show why partnership claims cannot substitute for evaluation of implementation.

B. Autonomous Actor: More Partners within a European Path

Serbia's relationship with China supports a second role claim: the state as an autonomous actor capable of choosing partners without accepting exclusive alignment. In official discourse, diversified cooperation is presented as a normal exercise of sovereignty. This framing is attractive domestically because it distinguishes external partnership from external tutelage.

Strategic hedging scholarship helps describe the behavioural pattern but can mislead if it implies equal distance among partners. Tzifakis and Vasdoka (2025) identify Serbia's gatekeeping position and its use of relations with several major powers. Serbia reduces risk by maintaining overlapping ties, obtaining resources from different actors, and avoiding complete dependence on any single political centre. Yet the relationships are not equivalent. The EU possesses far greater capacity to shape Serbia's laws, market access, and membership prospects.

China offers finance, investment, diplomatic support, and an alternative political vocabulary, but not an institutional substitute of comparable depth.

The value of the Chinese partnership lies partly in its convertibility. The existence of alternative finance can reduce the immediate cost of rejecting or delaying particular EU demands. Successful projects can be invoked in negotiations as evidence that Serbia has choices. High-level diplomatic recognition strengthens the leadership's domestic image of international relevance. At the same time, Serbian officials repeatedly confirm that EU membership remains a strategic objective. The apparent contradiction is managed by distinguishing ends from means: Europe remains the declared destination, while multi-vector cooperation defines the route and pace.

This strategy is not cost-free. EU institutions assess Serbia's alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy, public procurement, competition rules, state aid, environmental governance, and trade policy. Each additional arrangement can generate obligations that later require adjustment. Autonomy is thus relational and temporary rather than absolute. Serbia can broaden its options, but it cannot prevent its choices from being evaluated within the accession process.

C. Regional Connector: Converting Cooperation into Position

The role of regional connector links domestic development with foreign policy. Serbia's geography, market size, and transport corridors give the claim a material basis. Chinese-supported rail and road projects enable Serbian leaders to depict the country as an entry point linking Southern and Central Europe. Industrial investments and the FTA add production and commercial dimensions to this image.

Role claims require audiences. China recognises Serbia as an important Belt and Road partner and a showcase for cooperation in Europe. Serbian leaders use that recognition to elevate the country's visibility beyond what its material size might ordinarily provide. Neighbouring states, investors, and EU institutions, however, need not accept Serbia's preferred interpretation. Connectivity can be viewed as a regional public good, as national centralisation, or as a route through which external influence expands.

The distribution of benefits is also uneven. Corridors tend to privilege nodes already possessing infrastructure, administrative capacity, and access to finance. Serbia's centrality may grow without producing equal gains across the Western Balkans. A railway or industrial cluster can strengthen Belgrade's position while leaving peripheral areas weakly connected. The connector

role therefore describes a political project, not an automatically inclusive regional outcome.

Public opinion and media narratives help sustain this project. The Balkan Barometer provides evidence of how citizens across the region evaluate economic conditions, external partners, and regional cooperation, though it should not be reduced to a single measure of support for China (Regional Cooperation Council, 2025). In Serbia, favourable elite representations of China have been especially persistent (Vladisavljev, 2021). Visible infrastructure and industrial employment give these representations concrete reference points. Public approval, however, coexists with local contestation over environmental harm and transparency. “Friendship” is neither uniformly accepted nor politically meaningless.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WESTERN BALKAN ORDER

A. A Wider Repertoire of Development Partnerships

China's presence changes the Western Balkans first by expanding the repertoire of possible development partnerships. Governments can compare financing conditions, implementation speed, political expectations, and publicity value across different partners. Even when an alternative project is not selected, its availability may affect bargaining with European institutions and other lenders.

This change should not be exaggerated into a complete transformation of regional order. China does not offer a membership-based legal and political project comparable to the EU. It does not regulate the everyday movement of most goods, workers, and firms in the same way as the European market. Its influence is concentrated in particular sectors, projects, and political relationships. The resulting order is better described as European-centred but increasingly plural in instruments and partners.

Serbia is especially capable of using this pluralism because it combines size, location, administrative capacity, and high-level political access. Its experience may be imitated selectively by neighbours, but it is not a universal regional model. Smaller economies possess less bargaining power and may face different debt, market, or institutional constraints.

B. Connectivity and Uneven Regional Effects

Transport infrastructure can generate regional benefits by reducing travel times, attracting investment, and linking markets. The political geography of connectivity, however, determines who becomes a hub and who remains a transit space. Serbia's effort to become the principal intermediary between Chinese networks, the

Western Balkans, and Central Europe may reinforce its regional weight.

The construction of a connector role also affects regional narratives. Instead of describing Serbia primarily through the legacies of conflict and incomplete Europeanisation, official discourse presents it as a producer of links and a host of strategic projects. That shift can support cooperative diplomacy, but it can also conceal competitive efforts to centralise routes, investment, and political attention.

Projects crossing borders encounter multiple regulatory systems. The Belgrade-Budapest railway demonstrates that bilateral political commitment must coexist with EU procurement, competition, and safety rules on the Hungarian side. Such cases reveal the endurance of European structural power even within flagship Chinese cooperation (Pavličević, 2019). Connectivity does not bypass institutions; it brings different institutions into direct contact.

C. The Continuing Boundaries of European Institutions

The strongest limit on Serbia's multi-vector strategy remains the European institutional framework. The EU accession process monitors reforms across a broad range of policy fields, while the European market shapes the calculations of Serbian exporters and foreign investors. The Commission's assessments of procurement, environment, competition, foreign-policy alignment, and trade policy create continuing pressure for compatibility (European Commission, 2024, pp. 84-98).

This does not mean EU power is uncontested or uniformly effective. Delayed enlargement weakens incentives and creates opportunities for Serbian leaders to postpone costly reforms. Selective cooperation with China can reinforce that capacity. Yet delay is not equivalent to exit. The costs of abandoning the European path would be substantially greater than the costs of adjusting individual projects or agreements.

The China-Serbia FTA illustrates this temporal structure. In the present, it demonstrates diplomatic autonomy and promises new commercial opportunities. In the event of EU accession, it would have to be reconciled with the EU's common trade policy. Its current political value partly depends on membership remaining prospective rather than immediate. Multi-vector diplomacy is therefore sustained by the prolonged interval between candidacy and membership.

The wider regional implication is a layered order. European rules and markets form the deepest layer; national governments exercise agency in implementation;

and external partners provide additional resources, narratives, and sectoral networks. Conflict arises not simply because China and the EU promote mutually exclusive orders, but because specific forms of Chinese cooperation interact with accession obligations, domestic institutions, and local political interests.

CONCLUSION

China-Serbia relations demonstrate why the Western Balkans should not be analysed only as an arena of great-power competition. External actors matter, but their influence is mediated by local governments that select partners, define projects, translate diplomatic language, and convert external resources into domestic and regional roles.

Partnership discourse is central to this process. “Ironclad friendship,” “comprehensive strategic partnership,” and “community with a shared future” establish a narrative of continuity and trust. In Serbia, that narrative is adapted to themes of sovereignty, territorial integrity, development, and national choice. Infrastructure, industrial investment, and the free trade agreement give the language material reference points. Together, discourse and practice allow Serbia to present itself as a development partner, an autonomous actor, and a regional connector.

These roles have real effects. Cooperation with China has increased the range of available partnerships, supported industrial and infrastructure projects, raised Serbia's diplomatic visibility, and supplied resources for a multi-vector foreign policy. It has also produced trade asymmetry, environmental controversy, transparency concerns, and friction with EU rules. The benefits and risks cannot be derived from the identity of the external partner alone; they depend on project design, Serbian governance, ownership structures, and regulatory enforcement.

Serbia's agency remains bounded by the European context. The EU continues to be the country's main economic and institutional reference, and accession obligations reach more deeply into domestic governance than the partnership with China. Serbia is not replacing Europe with China. It is using cooperation with China to negotiate greater room for choice within a European-centred order whose final membership reward has been repeatedly delayed.

The case consequently suggests a more precise understanding of multi-vector foreign policy. It is neither neutrality nor equal alignment. It is the selective combination of relationships with different functions and

different degrees of dependence. Its durability rests partly on the unresolved interval of EU candidacy. Future research could compare how similar role claims operate in other Western Balkan states and examine whether closer EU integration narrows the space for bilateral arrangements or instead encourages new forms of compatibility.

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